DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 344 HE 023 420

AUTHOR Van Blerkom, Malcolm L.
TITLE Class Attendance in Undergraduate Classes: Why and When Do Students Miss Classes?
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attendance; *Attendance Patterns; Higher Education; Psychology; *Self Efficacy; State Universities; Theories; Trend Analysis; *Undergraduate Students

ABSTRACT

The first part of this study examined class attendance of 959 students in 17 sections of undergraduate psychology classes. It was found that class attendance decreased from the beginning to the end of the semester. An investigation of 117 of the students found that attendance displayed moderate correlations with course grades. Students missed class most frequently because of the time needed to complete other course work, because the class was boring, because of illness, and because classes interfered with students' social life. Self-efficacy theory is proposed as an approach to explain attendance behavior. Includes eight references. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED318344

Class Attendance in Undergraduate Classes: Why and When Do Students Miss Classes?

Malcolm L. Van Blerkom
114 Biddle Hall
University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown
Johnstown, PA 15904
(814) 269-7000

Abstract

Many college instructors complain about class attendance. However, little data has been gathered on when and why students miss class. The first part of this study examined class attendance in 17 sections of undergraduate psychology classes. It was found that class attendance decreased from the beginning to the end of the semester, and that attendance displayed moderate correlations with course grades. In the third part of the study it was also found that students missed class most frequently because of the time needed to complete other course work, because the class was boring, because of illness, and because classes interfered with their social life. Finally, there was an attempt to relate attendance behavior to an explanatory theory, specifically self-efficacy theory.

HE 023 420

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA, April, 1990.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Malcolm L.Van Blerkom

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Class Attendance in Undergraduate Classes: Why and When Do Students Miss Classes?

Those of us who teach have heard our colleagues complain about poor attendance in their classes (of course, all of us have almost perfect attendance in all of our own classes). Also, we all probably have our own pet theory about why and when students don't attend class, as well as which students are likely to miss classes. However, there has actually been very little systematic study of class attendance in college and factors that are likely to affect it.

There have been several studies that have examined attendance. For example, Baum and Youngblood (1975) examined attendance in a multiple section undergraduate accounting course. When attendance was compulsory, they found average daily attendance was 82%, whereas, when attendance was not compulsory, average daily attendance was reduced to 76%. Hovell, Williams, and Semb (1979) examined attendance in three sections of a child development class. In one section, students were given weekly quizzes and achieved 81% average daily attendance. In a second section, students were able to review weekly quizzes taken by other students during a previous semester and achieved a 77% average daily attendance. Finally, students in a third section, who neither took nor reviewed quizzes, achieved only 59% average daily attendance.

Beaulieu (1984) also examined attendance in three sections of an undergraduate course on personnel management. Attendance was encouraged either with the use of bonus points or small prizes. On days that attendance was taken, mean attendance rates ranged from a low of 70.28% to a high of 79.66%.

These studies appear to indicate that attendance rates vary, and that some classroom procedures are more effective than others in increasing attendance. However, they still tell us little about why students miss class. Galichon and Friedman (1985) examined correlates of class cutting at a metropolitan New York university. Poor class attendance was associated with preferences for socialization over study, the enjoyment of drinking alcoholic beverages and taking drugs, and the tendency to leave studying to the last minute. Students also indicated that the most important factors related to class cutting included finding the class boring, outside employment, a dislike for either the professor or the class, or the belief that the class was unrelated to their future career.

After reviewing the few studies available on this topic, we still are left with many questions about classroom attendance. For example, we do not know if attendance behavior is stable or if it varies throughout the week or the semester. Is attendance

behavior related to grades, and if so, how? Also, we do not have a theory that explains why students miss classes. The study described here examined four aspects of attendance. First, I examined how attendance trends varied throughout the semester. Second, I examined how attendance was related to performance in classes. Third, I examined what students said about why they missed classes. Finally, I attempted to relate these data to a theory that might help us better understand why and when students will miss classes.

Method

Subjects

The first two parts of the study involved 959 students enrolled in 17 sections of undergraduate Psychology courses from 1985 through 1987. These students were in either their first or second year of college at a two-year campus of a large state-related university. The third and fourth parts of the study involved, respectively, 237 and 117 undergraduates from a four-year campus of another major state-related university.

Procedures

For the first two parts of the study, attendance was taken in 17 sections of undergraduate Psychology courses by the use of an attendance sheet signed by the students. For the third part of the study students were administered a questionnaire on class attendance. The questionnaire requested that they report their gender, age, and class standing. They were also asked to estimate the number of classes that they missed during the last academic year. Finally, they were asked to respond to 31 Likert-type items on why they missed classes during their college career. The last part of the study involved examining attendance at several different points throughout the semester in a single large section of an undergraduate Psychology course. These attendance figures were then compared to grades on course examinations.

Results

The first step in the data analysis for part 1 was an examination of attendance trends (see Figure 1). The overall average daily attendance was 87.8%. As can be seen from Figure 1, attendance appeared to show a steady decline during the semester. During the first two weeks of the semester average daily attendance was 93.1%, whereas, during the last two weeks of the semester average daily attendance was 82.0%. This represented a significant trend, $r = -.82$, $p < .001$. There also appeared to be a tendency for attendance to be the lowest on Fridays. However, this trend was not significant, $F(2,39) = 2.31$, $p < .12$ (Monday, $M = 88.7\%$; Wednesday, $M = 89.0\%$; Friday, $M = 85.7\%$).

Insert Figure 1 about here.

The next step in the data analysis involved an examination of the relationship between class attendance and course grades. The correlation between these two variables was significant for all 17 sections. The correlations ranged from a low of .29 to a high of .73. The median correlation was .55.

An examination of the questionnaire data from part 3 revealed that students estimated that they had missed between 0 and 75 classes during the previous academic year (M = 11.0, SD = 11.9, Mn = 8.0). Analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant class level effect on this variable, F (4,227) = 2.59, $p < .04$. Sophomores reported missing more classes than any other group. Students indicated that the six most frequent reasons for missing class were 1) the need to complete an assignment or extra credit project, or to study for another course; 2) because they found the class boring; 3) because of severe illnesses such as the flu; 4) because of minor illnesses such as a headache, cold, or sore throat; 5) because they were simply too tired to go to class because of their active social life; and 6) because they had overslept.

The relationships among grades and scores on course examinations was then explored for 117 students from a single section of Introduction to Psychology. The data included scores on four examination and attendance from the beginning of the course until the first examination as well as attendance between subsequent examinations. Table 1 displays the correlations among these variables. It should be noted that the intercorrelations among the four examinations were all significant as were five of the six intercorrelations among the four bits of attendance data. Students displayed stability both on the examinations and in their attendance behavior throughout the semester. It should also be noted that the intercorrelations among attendance during the four quarters of the course increased toward the later part of the semester.

Insert Table 1 about here.

The correlations among the scores on examinations and attendance are of more interest. Of the 16 correlations, only two were significant. Scores on the third examination were significantly correlated with attendance just prior to that examination (r = .23, $p < .02$), as were scores on the final examination (r = .21, $p < .03$). Although the overall magnitude of these correlations is small, it should be noted that there was a rather severe range restriction. There were only from five to ten

classes between examinations when attendance could be taken and standard deviations ranged from a low of 0.70 to a high of 1.47.

Implications and Conclusions

Clearly, these data indicate, to no one's surprise, that not all students attend all classes. They also indicate that attendance declines from the beginning to the end of the semester, and that there is a tendency for attendance to vary during the week.

I have been especially interested in why attendance decreases throughout the semester. I had hypothesized that as students moved through the semester, they began to feel greater pressure from their coursework. Assignments that can be delayed early in the semester become more salient as deadlines approach. Also, as students move through the semester, they are better able to estimate how well they are doing in particular courses. Therefore, late in the semester students are faced with difficult decisions about time management. As indicated by their most endorsed response to the questionnaire, they often decide to cut one class in order to better prepare for another class. At times, this, in fact, may be a wise decision.

There is still another reason why students may miss more classes late in the semester. If students become discouraged by a class or come to realize that attending class has little effect on their grades, they may decrease attendance. Although the questionnaire did not address the question of discouragement directly, the sixth most endorsed reason for not attending class was because they simply felt like cutting class for no particular reason and the eighth most endorsed reason was because they felt that class attendance had little effect on their grade. Both of these suggest that discouragement may become a factor late in the semester.

The discouragement factor is supported by the consistent positive correlation between class attendance and course grades. Jones (1984) suggested that there were four possible causal models that could explain the relationship between grades and attendance. Both grades and attendance could be related to overall motivation, or to overall ability. Good attendance could result in better grades or, finally, good grades could lead to improved attendance. His data furnished some support for the last two of these models which led him to suggest a combined downward spiraling model. That is, when students miss a couple of classes early in the semester they do less well on their first examinations than they had hoped they would do. This leads to discouragement which results in missing more classes, receiving even lower grades, etc. Missing classes leads to poor grades, which leads to discouragement and missing more classes, which leads to even poorer grades.

This explanation is in keeping with the social cognitive view of self-regulated learning, and especially self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Schunk, 1984; Zimmerman, 1989). Assuming that students make decisions to not attend class, it is argued that these decisions are based on perceived self-efficacy. If students view themselves as capable of successfully accomplishing a task they will more likely attempt it. However, if they view themselves as less capable, they are more likely to avoid the same task. One of the sources of information that students use to make self-efficacy judgements is their own prior performance. Prior performance becomes especially relevant when students have few other ways to alter self-efficacy estimates. Therefore, if students do well on a first assignment or examination, they will likely raise their estimate of their self-efficacy. This generally will lead them to feel more encouraged about their probability of success and be more willing to put in more effort (e.g. attend class regularly). However, poor performance will lead students to lower their estimate of self-efficacy. With success appearing less likely, they are discouraged from exerting more effort and are more likely to miss classes.

Such a model would be confirmed if the correlations between examination scores and attendance following the examinations would show a steady increase throughout the semester. That is, prior performance would affect subsequent attendance behavior, and this effect should be cumulative. An examination of the correlation matrix from Table 1 indicates only weak support for such an hypothesis. The three correlations between scores on examinations and attendance immediately following the examinations were all nonsignificant. This could be interpreted to mean that self-efficacy theory does not account for this behavior. However, attendance during the third quarter was significantly correlated with scores on both the third exam (r = .23, p > .02) and on the final (r = .21, p < .03).

If discouragement is responsible for lower attendance late in the semester, there may be a couple of ways to decrease this tendency. In general, this could be accomplished by convincing students that early poor performance in a course will not necessarily lead to a lower course grade. Some instructors attempt to deal with this by allowing students to drop their lowest examination or quiz grade. I have resorted to telling students that if they perform poorly on their first or second examination, and subsequently perform better on future examinations, I will weight the lowest examination less than the other examinations. I tell them about this policy immediately following the first examination in order to attempt to reduce any of the effects of discouragement when they are likely to be at their highest. However, I do not have any empirical evidence to indicate that either of these procedures result in increased attendance.

References

Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. American Psychologist, 37, 122-147.

Baum, J. F., & Youngblood, S. A. (1975). Impact of an organizational control policy on absenteeism, performance, and satisfaction. Journal of Applied Psychology, 60, 688-694.

Beaulieu, R.P. (1984). The effects of traditional and alternative rewards on attendance. College Student Journal, 18, 126-130.

Galichon, J. P., & Friedman, H. H. (1985). Cutting college class: An investigation. College Student Journal, 19, 357-360.

Hovell, M. F., Williams, R. L., & Semb, G. (1979). Analysis of undergraduates' attendance at class meetings with and without grade-related contingencies: A contrast effect. Journal of Educational Research, 73, 50-53.

Jones, C. H. (1984). Interaction of absences and grades in a college course. The Journal of Psychology, 116, 133-136.

Schunk, D. H. (1984). Self-efficacy perspective on achievement behavior. Educational Psychologist, 19, 48-58.

Zimmerman, B. J. (1989). A social cognitive view of self-regulated academic learning. Journal of Educational Psychology, 81, 329-339.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix for Part 4

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Exam 1	.45**	.48**	.46**	.05	.00	.08	-.08
2. Exam 2		.46**	.43**	.12	.02	.17	.02
3. Exam 3			.29**	.05	.09	.23*	.11
4. Exam 4				.00	.01	.21*	.10
5. Attendance - 1st quarter					.33**	.25**	.13
6. Attendance - 2nd quarter						.64**	.50**
7. Attendance - 3rd quarter							.62**
8. Attendance - 4th quarter							

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Fig. 1: Class Attendance